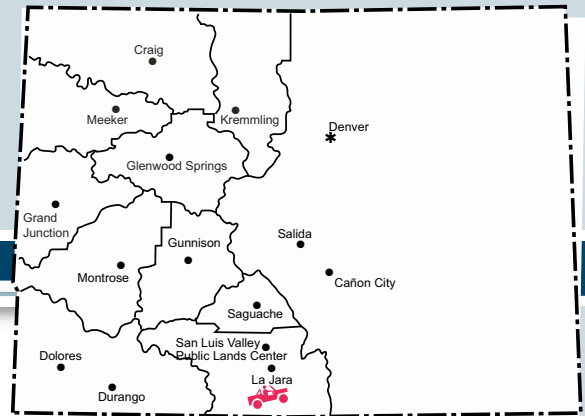


COLORADO

San Luis Valley Public Land Center



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Rio Grande Corridor Riparian Restoration Project

By Jaime Gardner

In the large expanse of the San Luis Valley, there is a gem of river corridor that has begun to flourish under new actions taken by the local BLM and Forest Service management. Along two very distinct sections of the Rio Grande, the BLM La Jara Field Office has recently completed new surveys to distinguish land ownership boundaries in order to restore riparian habitat along the river.

“Even though we are in the worst drought of the century, the riparian habitat is showing the most recovery anyone now living has seen along that part of the River,” says Jim Rhett, Associate Center Manager at the San Luis Valley Public Land Center. “I credit the close personal involvement of the Field Manager, Roberto Martinez, and his staff for the increase in riparian vegetation.”

Along the first river segment of the project, a 15-mile corridor with sparsely vegetated hills rising above the general river elevation, are remnants of old cottonwood galleries which are slowly being restored. The second segment is an opportunity for improvement of water quality and amphibian and fisheries habitat. Here, 7 miles of river corridor flows through a stark, sheer-walled gorge with a very narrow riparian zone between the edges of the water and the steep wall of the canyon.

The Rio Grande is a free-flowing river throughout the State of Colorado. There are no major water impoundments, although several irrigation ditch returns are located along the River, and there are remnants of an old washed-out rock dam south of the Highway 142 bridge. All along the river corridor are beautiful archeological and wildlife values, including habitat



Riparian Corridor north of highway 142 bridge where trespass cattle continue to be a problem. This area is representative of what the Rio Grande Corridor has looked like as a whole for about the last 100+ years. Note: Trespass cattle can be observed in the background.



for several Threatened & Endangered species. There are many opportunities for riparian recovery, including the restoration of cottonwood and coyote willow tree communities, narrowing and deepening of the stream channel, and improvement of water quality and habitat.

The local BLM and Forest Service staff worked with the general public, Indian tribes, other federal agencies, and State and local government to identify issues related to the River corridor and the riparian habitat. Concerns were raised about conflicts with recreation, grazing, and other resource uses and their effects on the habitat.

BLM worked closely with the public to develop desired future conditions for the project area in the late 1990s. Beginning in 1997, the BLM goals for the area for the next 15 years included:

1. Improved riparian habitat along the corridor.
2. Protection of scenic resources (Visual Resource Management).
3. Archeological resource protection.
4. Recreation and facility development – manage facilities to meet the needs of the landscape.
5. Monitor public access to protect resources.
6. Focus on interpretation and public education.

BLM has achieved many of these goals in a very short time. Approximately 90 percent of the total riparian area is in “Functional at Risk” condition, however an upward trend is clearly exhibited and the area of riparian acreage has increased. Although increased human presence has influenced vegetative communities and wildlife populations, the impacts on these resources have been mitigated.

Archeological and historic sites have been identified, documented, stabilized, and interpreted in response to increased visitation. BLM has constructed or remodeled facilities to blend in with the natural landscape at the Lobatos Bridge and lower gorge sites. In some areas, facilities have been eliminated to meet resource needs.

The BLM shares responsibility for stewardship with residents, communities, visitors and providers of commercial recreation services to benefit public and private land. Each of these individuals act as an interpreter in educating visitors about the public land. At the same time, visitors can continue to find opportunities for solitude in this diverse area.

The San Luis Valley Public Lands Center and its field offices are jointly managed between the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service under the Service First program. Through Service First, BLM and the Forest Service co-locate offices in different areas in order to combine administrative costs. BLM manages 8.4 million surface acres in Colorado, and the Forest Service manages 14.5 million acres of National Forests and Grasslands.

For more information, contact:

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Riparian Corridor south of 142 bridge where BLM management has been able to greatly decrease cattle trespass. This photo reflects the Riparian restoration along 22 miles of the Rio Grande (with the exception of trespassed area). One can observe riparian plant communities, stream channel width/depth ratios improving and bank stability greatly increasing. Fence area is a riparian enclosure, however outside of the enclosure is exposed and still thriving with little to no grazing.